

**Comments to the Montana Senate Agriculture, Livestock and
Irrigation Committee Re: Senate Bill 337 by the Montana Chapter
of The Wildlife Society. February 17, 2009.**

Good afternoon. I am John Vore, here representing the Montana Chapter of The Wildlife Society, which opposes Senate Bill 337.

The Wildlife Society is an international ~~professional society~~ ^{organization} of over 9,600 professional wildlife biologists, research scientists, educators, resource managers, administrators, and students in more than 60 countries. Our principal objectives include developing and promoting scientifically sound wildlife management and seeking the highest standards for the wildlife profession. The Montana Chapter has over 300 members.

Nine years ago the Montana Chapter adopted an official position statement on wild bison in Montana that recognized the high ecological and cultural values of this species to our state. I have a copy of the entire statement to be entered into the record, but in summary it says, and I quote,

“The Montana Chapter of The Wildlife Society is in full support of maintaining current free-roaming wild bison and encourages the establishment of additional herds in Montana where it is ecologically, economically and socially acceptable. We recommend that Federal and State resource agencies in Montana develop long range plans for the restoration of free roaming bison herds on tribal lands or suitable federal public lands.”

There can be little argument that wild plains bison are an important part of our North American heritage. Wild bison have great economic, cultural and spiritual importance to Montana's Indian tribes; and they are woven into the fabric of non-native American history and culture as well. They are *the* symbol of the American West.

There can also be little argument that wild bison are important ecologically, they are considered by many as the quintessential example of a keystone species. Yet today they remain ecologically extinct.

Now, here we are in 2009. There are only some 20,500 wild plains bison in all of North America. We really need to appreciate the importance of Yellowstone's

bison to the continent. Yellowstone's wild plains bison are one of only three herds that number over 1,000. Yellowstone's wild plains bison are one of only five herds that is genetically pure, there have been no cattle genes detected in Yellowstone's bison. And Yellowstone's bison are a source stock that reaches back to the original North American plains populations.

Now again, here we are in 2009, considering prohibiting relocating any of Yellowstone's bison as a result of the Bison Quarantine Feasibility Study because of a fear that they will spread brucellosis. Here we need to appreciate the scientific rigor applied in this study. It was designed by some of the best wildlife, animal health and animal science professionals in the field, underwent extensive scientific and public review, and has been carried out under the most exacting and rigorous standards. Supporters and contributors include the Greater Yellowstone Interagency Brucellosis Committee, U. S. Animal Health Association Brucellosis Committee, the Montana Department of Livestock, USDA-APHIS, and the Intertribal Bison Cooperative.

It is important to point out that only bison calves that test ^{2d} seronegative are in the study, and that these animals have been held for between 2 ½ and 4 years, all the while repeatedly tested. There was an additional step that tested the validity of the blood work. At least half of the animals in the original test group were slaughtered and went through extensive culture testing to assure the accuracy of the blood tests. Plus, they have been vaccinated. There has never been a domestic bison or cattle herd in the world that has met higher standards than bison coming out of the quarantine facility. Finally, bison leaving the facility would be held in closed herds and monitored for an additional five years.

The Quarantine Protocol applied in the study is more rigorous than any ever attempted for wild or domestic animals to date. Its standards are many, many times higher than those applied to domestic cattle that move in and out of the Greater Yellowstone Area or across Montana and the country. If these standards are not high enough then it raises significant questions about the entire National Animal Health System that depends on APHIS Uniform Methods and Rules standards. If these standards are not high enough, then what does "disease free" mean for domestic livestock that are held to much lower standards? If these standards are not high enough then any discussion about the goal of brucellosis eradication comes off the table because there would be no satisfactory measure of accomplishing that goal by industry. If these standards are not high enough then to what standards is the livestock industry held to attain "brucellosis free" status?

Senate Bill 337 is a step backward in the management of brucellosis in bison and in the conservation of wild bison. It is not in the best interest of the Nation, Montana, Conservation Interests or the Livestock Industry. This bill would take the positive benefits of sound animal health science and exchange them for another black eye for Montana.

The Montana Chapter of The Wildlife Society opposes Senate Bill 337 because it would preclude using important, genetically pure and, upon leaving the quarantine facility, certified disease free wild plains bison to re-establish or augment wild herds in Montana and elsewhere.

Thank you for this opportunity and your time.

Position Statement of the Montana Chapter of The Wildlife Society on Wild Bison in Montana

The Wildlife Society -- The Wildlife Society (TWS) is an international professional society established in 1937. The Society's membership of more than 9,600 includes research scientists, educators, communications specialists, resource managers, conservation law enforcement officers, administrators, and students in more than 60 countries. The principal objectives of The Wildlife Society are: (1) to develop and promote sound stewardship of wildlife resources and of the environments upon which wildlife and humans depend; (2) to undertake an active role in preventing human-induced environmental degradation; (3) to increase awareness and appreciation of wildlife values; and (4) to seek the highest standards in all activities of the wildlife profession.

The Montana Chapter of The Wildlife Society (hereafter known as The Chapter) has a current membership of 310. Chapter members include individuals employed by state and federal agencies, educational institutions, non-profit organizations, industry, and consultants, as well as retirees and graduate students.

Legal Status of Wild Bison in Montana -- Wild Bison in Montana are recognized as a game animal [Montana Statutes 87-2-101 subsection (6)] and also as a species in need of management (ibid. 87-1-216). Bison originating from Yellowstone national park are designated as a species requiring disease control [ibid. 87-1-216 (1)(a)] while other wild bison are designated as a species in need of management [ibid. 87-1-216 (1)(b)].

Values of Wild Bison in Montana -- Montana is a state richly blessed in scenic splendor, abundant wildlife, and extensive wild lands. Bison were once the dominant ungulate on Montana's prairie grasslands. They were extirpated through unregulated hunting during Montana's territorial period but were not included in the wildlife restoration efforts of the 20th century. Wild bison once roamed the vast rolling plains in numbers almost unimaginable, and are an important part of our American heritage and western culture. Restoration of wild bison is important ecologically and culturally because:

- Bison were a keystone species of the prairie ecosystem; significantly affecting the way the prairie grassland ecosystem evolved and playing an important role in maintaining it.
- Wild bison remain ecologically extinct in Montana. The State of Montana Department of Livestock has prevented the natural dispersal of wild bison into Montana from Yellowstone National Park because of disease issues while no attempts are underway to restore the species outside of this controversial region.
- Current management of private, state and Federal bison herds is leading towards domestication of bison that threatens their wild character and limits important natural selection processes.
- Wild bison were of great prehistoric and historic importance to Montana. Indeed, no other wild animal is more symbolic of the American west than the bison. The Lewis and Clark expedition noted this importance in their journals and were dependent upon bison for food and materials when exploring Montana. The Lewis and Clark bicentennial in Montana will be 2005-2006. Restoration of bison to an area traversed

by Lewis and Clark would be a living tribute to an event that was so important to our State's history.

- Wild bison had great economic, cultural and spiritual importance to Montana's Indian tribes. Cooperative management of wild bison on reservation/Federal lands would help restore these traditional values.

Position of the Chapter – In view of the foregoing, The Montana Chapter of The Wildlife Society is in full support of maintaining current free-roaming wild bison and encourages the establishment of additional herds in Montana where it is ecologically, economically and socially acceptable. We recommend that Federal and State resource agencies in Montana develop long range plans for the restoration of free roaming bison herds on tribal lands or suitable federal public lands.

Signed by the Executive Board of The Montana Chapter of The Wildlife Society

Adopted April 11, 2000